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ABSTRACT

Issues facing special educators working in a correctional setting are examined. The need for long-range planning is considered, and the use of the individualized education program to address specific as well as broad issues is advocated. A major need, for increased institutional priority (with both administrative and funding priority for educational programming), is considered along with problems of isolation facing teachers who feel alientated from other educators and from the community outside the institution. The resultant lack of professional identity can be alleviated by greater understanding of the field and the individuals' role unit. (CL)

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Issues and Challenges Facing Special Education Teachers in a Correctional Setting

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Bruce I. Wolford

"Teaching in prison leaves a taint on a man. You'll have a difficult time getting back into public schools if you ever want to."
(Campbell, 1978)

To open an examination of teaching in a correctional setting with this passage from W. Reason Campbell's book, *Dead Man Walking: Teaching in a Maximum Security Prison*, may seem a bit ominous. It is not meant to foreshadow impending doom, but rather to illustrate that correctional education is in many ways a unique process. The teacher who works in any correctional setting, be it a prison, jail, juvenile detention camp, or a community-based corrections program, faces challenges different from his/her public school counterpart.

Not only must the correctional educator have mastery of a teaching field (math, science, reading, etc.), but also an understanding of and ability to cope with often hostile environments and populations. In order to identify major issues facing teachers in correctional settings, this author has reviewed a number of studies and accounts of individuals' experiences.

ISSUES IN CORRECTIONAL TEACHING

The most comprehensive recent examination of correctional education identified 20 issues related to correctional education (Bell, Conard, Laffey, Lutz, Miller, Simon, Stakelon, & Wilson, 1979). Five of these have direct relationship to the correctional teacher.

1. Lack of comprehensive planning to provide long term funding, development and integration of educational programs;
2. Low priority assigned to educational programs within the institution;
3. Limitation of educational opportunity by lack of contact with the outside world;
4. Hostility of security staff toward educational programs; and
5. Poor quality of instruction and lack of specially trained teachers. (Bell, 1979)

In a self-analysis conducted by teachers in the Oklahoma Department of Corrections a similar set of issues emerged including a lack of professionalism, conflicts with security personnel, failure to aggressively sell correctional education in the classification process, low quality programs, and no long

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range plans for correctional education (Roberts, 1982). Although Oklahoma may not be a representative state in terms of its commitment to correctional education, many of the problems identified exist in numerous states.

In addition to broad issues of correctional education, each teacher must also learn to adapt to the correctional environment. Three major concerns emerged from Campbell's (1978) account of his expriences teaching in a maximum security prison:

1. Learning and understanding the environment;
2. Accepting the population; and
3. Deciding what and how to teach to the inmate student.

Focusing upon the special education teacher in the correctional setting brings attention to some additional issues. The first is the limited number of special educators working in correctional settings. The national average of special educators in 1979 was approximately one per correctional institution (Bell, 1979). This is particularly alarming in light of recent research which indicates that a significant percentage of the incarcerated population can be considered learning disabled (Murray, 1976). Most correctional institutions do not have effective screening mechanisms to identify the learning disabled. In addition, severely learning disabled inmates face an increased likelihood of victimization (Bowker, 1980). The learning disabled individual may well suffer more pains of punishment than do other not so disadvantaged inmates. The stresses of incarceration and the threat of victimization can certainly effect the learning disabled inmate.

The special educator often lacks support personnel ad resources necessary for dealing with learning disabled students. Because many correctional education programs have students for only a limited time and there is great demand for services in our many overcrowded institutions, there has been an increasing emphasis placed on short term certificate/proficiency programs. The "quick-fix" educational approach, although pragmatic and at times certainly capable of generating impressive completion rates, does not always provide for the time needed by special educators to identify, develop, and remediate the problems of the learning disabled.

CENTRAL ISSUES

What emerges from the preceding discussion are four central issues facing correctional teachers:

1. There is a need for long range planning in correctional education programs.
2. Educational programming needs to be assigned a high administrative and funding priority within correctional institutions and agencies.
3. Many correctional education programs and teachers are isolated both from the community and other segments of the correctional systems.
4. There exists a lack of professional identity within the field of correctional education.

NEED FOR PLANNING

The need for planning, as well as the establishment of goals and objectives, begins in the classroom and moves up through the correctional education system. If no direction is established, neither the classroom nor the educational system will make significant progress. The classroom teachers who wait for the central administrator to develop goals and objectives will likely be faced with an unwanted direction or no direction at all. The teachers in the

Oklahoma Departmet of Corrections who conducted a self-analysis used the information to chart a new direction for themselves and correctional education in Oklahoma. The teachers in that system provide an example of what can be done by beginning in the classroom and working up through the correctional system.

The development of IEP (Individualized Educational Plans) by classroom teachers can become the model for not only providing educational services to the incarcerated learner, but also addressing the broader issues in correctional special education. The IEP approach can be applied to both the teacher and the educational system. By assessing the existing competencies and identifying areas in need of improvement and or development, the correctional educator can begin to establish a new direction for himself and the correctional school system.

NEED FOR INCREASED INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY

Teachers are providing an important service in the correctional setting, not only for the inmates, but also for the institution. In all too many correctional institutions, educational programs are the only viable opportunity available for residents who want to make a change in their lives. Because it can provide this opportunity, education serves the students and also benefits the institution. It provides hope for many individuals who otherwise have little reason to look forward. This and the meaningful activities that a school can provide make life more tolerable for some in our overcrowded institutions. Education has provided correctional institutions with both a positive and economical means of dealing with inmates. Education is the most economical treatment/-rehabilitation program available in most correctional institutions. The general pubic and inmates can easily agree on the need for education within the correctional setting. Often, correctional education is the only positive change-oriented activity provided in the prison. It is the responsibility of teachers to sell their programs to supervisors, other employees (particularly in the area of custody), and administrators. The teacher must venture out of the classroom and the school building and become actively involved in the operation of the total institution.

One common problem found in the prison is that inmate students receive less institutional pay (subsistance level support from the state) than do residents who perform regular work assignments. This disparity in pay can certainly reduce the incentive to pursue an education in prison and in fact identifies the students as a second-class inmate. Recognition of the importance of education by the correctional administrators might lead them to reduce the pay inequities. The way to raise the priority of education in corrections is to bring it to the attention of correctional administrative personnel both within the institution and in the central office.

PROBLEMS OF ISOLATION

> "At times, I feel I'm living in a hiatus
> where nothing is real. There are times
> when I'm behind the walls and I begin to
> see things from an inmate's perspective."
> (Hruska, 1981)

This teacher's observations are not unusual. The experience of working in a correctional institution has generated similar feelings for many educators. The correctional educator frequently feels isolated from his/her colleagues,

the community outside the institution, and the students. The very nature of a correctional institution may account for some of these feelings, but there is more to it than just being behind fences and bars. The correctional educator faces daily questions for which society does not have answers. What should we do with offenders? How can we help them to change? What constitutes a just and equitable puishment? The teacher who works with incarcerated students, cares about them, and attempts to foster understanding and change in them cannot ignore these questions. The teacher must make personal decisions, act upon those decisions, and be prepared to face daily challenges to his/her beliefs. The physical isolation of prison can be coped with by participating in programs and activities which get teachers out of the institution and the public into it. The more serious aspect of isolation is the emotional isolation many teachers experience while in such settings. This issue presents a personal challenge to all who teach in prison.

There exists a need for both preservice and in-service training directed specifically at the field of correctional education. College and university departments of education and criminal justice should direct their attention toward the needs of correctional educators. The problem of isolation can only be remedied through the involvement of correctional educators with extra-prison resources such as college and university personnel.

LACK OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

> "Most CE professionals were not trained for their current jobs. We pursued preparatory training in response to non-CE career aspirations, and we identify as professionals, in those careers."
> (Gehring, 1981)

For reasons already discussed and because correctional education is a relatively small field, it has been difficult for individuals who teach in corrections to formulate a professioal identity. Correctional educators need to develop a notion of professionalism. They can do so by joining organizations such as the Correctional Education Association, and by studying the origin and development of correctional education. By learning more about the history, development, and current trends in the field of correctional education, teachers can gain an understanding of the profession and increased recognition of the important task in which they are involved. But above all the teacher must develop the professional competencies needed to work with the special student in a correctional setting. A professional identity will surely develop in the teacher who is confident and competent in the correctional classroom.

CONCLUSION

> "To be successful amid the many challenges and problems inherent in penal educational programs, an instructor must possess an extraordinary commitment to teaching and learning."
> (George, 1980)

Teachers in correctional settings face many challenges. There are clearly a number of important issues which need to be addressed by the profession. The challenges of these issues are not beyond the capacity of educators to begin to address and cope with. The responsibility for dealing with these

issues rests with correctional educators. But to effect meaningful change the field of correctional education will need the support and action of government through new legislation, appropriation, and leadership, colleges and universities that can provide preservice and in-service education, and correctional administrators who can heighten the priority of correctional education and provide increased budgets.

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